

Session Appeal

Break Out of the Breakouts

Some conference planners spend a lot of time worrying about how to energize their attendees after lunch.

One of their ultimate fears: After consuming a three-course meal – with the heavy dessert they would never have at home – attendees will doze off during the fifth PowerPoint presentation of the day on reaching their sales goals.

But that particular concern is merely scratching the surface these days, said Jim Carroll, a regular keynote speaker and author. With prospective attendees in a position to pick and choose which conferences they'll attend, they are increasingly looking for meetings that can give them information they need and elevate their frame of mind, not just their adrenaline.

BY RACHELLE CRUM

Organizers need to be more inventive if they want their audiences to be enlightened by their sessions and retain much of what they hear once they return to their jobs, Carroll said. According to him, there are two types of conference planners: "those who are on autopilot, and those who agree that things have got to change."

One more piece of advice that many agree on: Conference planners need to look for novel approaches to get their message across to attendees. "Two of the most powerful words in the English vocabulary are 'new' and 'free,'" said Cherif Moujabber, president of Creative Expos & Conferences. "Since we cannot usually have free conferences, we have to compensate and focus on the new."

Moujabber said for-profit organizers should take a page from associations in incorporating originality. Generally, he said, "The association people do a better job at conferences. For-profits look at the conference as a necessary expenditure."

The challenge will not get any easier either. Carroll said he believes it will become increasingly difficult to host compelling conferences as

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more and more companies focus on how to best keep their meetings costs under control. "This shouldn't be the goal," he added.

To get away from the mindset that a good conference program, first, is cheap and, second, merely keeps attendees awake after lunch, Carroll suggests that organizers eliminate the use of words that "mean the same old thing" – words like teambuilding, icebreaker, keynote, spousal program and breakout session. "Banish the words and you are banishing a certain line of thinking. Radical times call for radical change, and that's a good point to get across."

Throwing out your program brochure template and moving to a new location are other ways to help invigorate a conference. "Confront boring," Carroll said. "Think different, be different, do different."

Keeping up with the latest issues of whatever constituency you serve is essential, Carroll said. "Your industry is changing overnight. We need more relevance in the programs."

Forget motivational speakers who eventually all sound the same, he said. "People are getting this message over and over again. Where's the relevance?"

Michelle Finn, vice president of VNU Expositions' HD (Hospitality Design) Group, agrees. "We don't have a keynote for the sake of having a keynote," she said. Finn doesn't include a keynote unless a compelling industry member is interested in keynoting one of her three HD conferences. For example, Andre Balazs, owner of Miami Beach's Raleigh Hotel, spoke at the 2004 **Hospitality Design Boutique Expo & Conference** at the Miami Beach Convention Center.

Along with tracking what future hotels will look like and who their guests will be, Finn said she mounts her three HD conferences to stimulate attendees' imaginations with discussions about environmentally friendly design and brand differentiation. "We really pay attention to making them vibrant and exciting," she said.

John Marino, vice president of science and technology for the Natl. Assn. of Broadcasters, avoids featuring outdated subjects by forbidding large planning committees for the NAB conference.

"We have found that by the time a committee decides on a specific topic, it likely is out of date by the time the conference is scheduled," he said. "Everything is moving very quickly these days and conference planners need to concentrate on good, solid research."

Tradeshow industry consultant Michael Hough, president of MRH Associates, plotted to drive the message home at last year's TSW Fastest 50 conference by ending the day with a session led by Consumer Electronics Assn.'s Dan Cole and Susan Littleton, who discussed successful strategies for their near-1.4 million net square foot show, Intl. CES.

"I knew that the combination of those two would be very good," Hough said, since he anticipated that attendees would be eager for an insiders' look at the show, which has remained at or near the top of the TSW 200 for more than 10 years.

Hough suggested catering to specific interests that every attendee may not necessarily share. In order to balance conference appeal, Hough said he often targets narrow audiences rather (Go to p. 24)

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Expertly Speaking, from p. 12

Blouin, who works year-round with several speakers bureaus, considers them an indispensable part of the conference-planning process. For one thing, she said, it's impossible to get directly in touch with the personalities that bureaus have in their databases. Besides, planners would waste a lot of time doing the legwork it takes to track down the people that bu-

reaus already have on file — not to mention the paperwork it takes to actually book them.

Many specialize: Some have athletes; others, members of certain industries. The massive Washington Speakers Bureau, for instance, is known for its access to politicians, news anchors and famous businesspeople.

Another factor that distinguishes speakers bureaus is their business model. Some, like Washington, have exclusive contracts with their speakers — meaning it's

their obligation to book business for their speaker clients.

Others, like Speak, work with presenters that are signed up with many different companies. These consider the meeting planner their client.

Both types are effective; choosing the best one depends on the circumstances, Blouin said. In fact, she advised meeting planners to sketch out the framework of what they want a speaker to accomplish before they even approach a bureau. **TSW**

Session Appeal, from p. 19

than distract attendees with competing sessions. "In each time period, you should try to attract each niche," he said.

Finn agreed. Because of the large number of Spanish-speaking attendees, mostly hailing from the greater Miami area, the October HD Boutique show offered a conference session conducted in Spanish without translation, which energized attendees fluent in the language, Finn said.

Also, to avoid hearing hisses from the audience during your conference, steer clear of allowing exhibitors to sell their products or services. "Conference attendees are becoming very sensitized to what speakers have to say," Marino said.

Having an exhibitor speak at all, Hough said, is "a dead giveaway that the conference is not that good." He suggests having exhibitors speak on a panel instead. "When you're with your competitors, you're less likely to give a sales pitch." **TSW**

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Breathe Life Into Your Next Meeting

- Switch off autopilot; ask yourself if attendees just want more of the same.
- Resist temptation to look at conference as business opportunity; look at it as opportunity for industry.
- Banish antiquated conference-speak terms like teambuilding, breakouts and icebreaker; create new terms.
- Reinvent your program brochure.
- Tackle pressing industry issues in conference sessions, rather than leaving them for attendees to talk about at your cocktail party.
- Forget about a keynote speaker unless it is someone who absolutely knocks your socks off.
- Target specific audience groups in each time period; avoid distracting attendees with competing sessions.
- Don't allow speaking exhibitors to make sales pitches.